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Asexuality

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ABSTRACT *Asexuality is overlooked in the philosophical literature and in wider society. Such neglect produces incomplete or inaccurate accounts of romantic life and harms asexual people. We develop an account of asexuality to redress this neglect and enrich discussion of romantic life. Asexual experiences are diverse. Some asexual people have sex; some have romantic relationships in the absence of sex. We accept the common definition of asexuality as the absence of sexual attraction and explain how sexual attraction and sexual desire differ by giving an affordance-like account of sexual attraction. Armed with that distinction, we show that asexuality is clearly different from celibacy or disorders of desire and that some existing philosophical theories of sexual desire struggle to accommodate asexual sexuality. We then build on asexual testimony about the diversity of non-sexual attractions to answer two common objections levelled at asexual romance: that romantic relationships require sexual attraction or that sex in the absence of sexual attraction is insufficiently focused on someone as an individual. Finally, we describe some of the ways asexuality has been erased or denigrated in society, and the specific injustices and harms that result.*

> Asexuality isn't a complex. It's not a sickness. It's not an automatic sign of trauma. It's not a behavior. It's not the result of a decision. It's not a chastity vow or an expression that we are 'saving ourselves'. We aren't by definition religious. We aren't calling ourselves asexual as a statement of purity or moral superiority. We're not amoebas or plants. We aren't automatically gender confused, anti-gay, anti-straight, anti-any-sexual orientation, anti-woman, anti-man, anti-any-gender or anti sex. We aren't automatically going through a phase, following a trend, or tying to rebel. We aren't defined by prudishness. We aren't calling ourselves asexual because we failed to find a suitable partner. We aren't necessarily afraid of intimacy. And we aren't asking for anyone to 'fix' us. (Decker, 2015, p. 3)

1. Introduction

Asexual people do not experience sexual attraction to others. But many asexuals have romantic relationships, and some engage in sexual activity. Asexuals make up a group of approximately 1% to 6% of the population.[1] With a few exceptions, however, asexuals and their experiences have been overlooked by philosophers. This neglect is

problematic in several ways. Theoretically, our understanding of sexuality and romantic life can be enriched and challenged by attention to asexuality. Practically, the theoretical neglect of asexuality has contributed to its everyday erasure and denigration which continues to harm asexual people.

In this article, we take modest steps towards reversing this neglect. Our task is partly that of situating asexuality within the existing philosophical discourse about sexuality and romantic love; partly that of documenting the specific harms experienced by asexual people; and partly that of illustrating the research which needs to be done. Our methodology is simple. We write as two allosexual people—that is, people who experience sexual attraction—and so we shall presuppose that asexual people have accurately described their lived experiences. We provide no independent argument for these claims, but any empirically minded approach to sexual phenomena ought to avoid distrusting sexual minorities in the absence of overriding reasons. Some of the concepts used here are subject to debate and clarification, but the core distinctions we describe are widely attested in both the research literature and amongst asexual communities.[2]

In Section 2, we provide an account of asexuality which sets out its core features, distinguishes it from celibacy and disorders of desire, and shows how it is compatible with the pursuit of a romantic life. A distinction between the experience of sexual desire, and of sexual attraction, is central to this account, but readers may worry that such a distinction is implausible. In Section 3, we take this concern seriously and show how asexuality is more compatible with some philosophical accounts of sexual desire than others. Even if sexual desire and sexual attraction can come apart, the latter is often assumed to be especially important. In Section 4, therefore, we focus on attraction. We draw attention to the idea, central to asexual discourse, that attraction is a rich and diverse phenomenon which must not be reduced to sexual attraction. Recognizing this is important in several ways. First, neglect of attraction's diversity partly explains why asexuality has been denied or neglected. Second, it provides us with resources to dispel the myth that asexuality is incompatible with romantic love. Finally, it may help address the broader normative concern that sex in the absence of sexual attraction is morally problematic. With this understanding of asexuality in place, we then turn, in Section 5, to describe some of the ways asexuality has been erased or denigrated in society and the specific injustices and harms that result.

2. Understanding Asexuality

Asexuality is standardly defined as the absence of sexual *attraction* to other people.[3] As will become clear later, 'asexuality' is a misleading term. Perhaps something clumsier, like 'obtraction', would better capture what is central to asexual experience; namely, the absence of distinctly sexual attraction to others, not necessarily the absence of sexual desire, or sexual activity, or other kinds of attraction.

To understand what asexuality is, we need to define sexual attraction. To do that, we first need a general understanding of attraction. But attraction is hard to define. For example, asexuality researcher Anthony Bogaert describes attraction as 'that rather basic, even primal, lure that draws us to someone or something'.[4]

This notion of a 'lure' should not be cashed out in terms of desire, although it is closely connected to desiring. This is because desires are more closely connected to

action than attraction.[5] Instead, the phenomenon of attraction is akin to sensitivity to *affordances*. Affordances are opportunities for action within a specific context which are relative to our existing interests and capacities.[6] Action, here, does not just include physical acts, like approaching or touching, but mental actions too, like attending to something, imagining, or reminiscing.[7] Sensitivity to affordances has an automatic, effortless, affective, and motivational phenomenology; certain things present opportunities for action relative to us, and still others seem to actively *invite* action.[8] Attraction is akin to the latter phenomena. To be attracted to something is for that thing to solicit a kind of engagement with it.

Attraction relates to our desires in complex ways. To see this, consider an example. You are walking along an alpine trail on a hot day, turn a corner, and encounter a cool pool. The pool is *inviting*. You are sensitive to it not only as an opportunity for a refreshing swim, but as inviting one. This experience can be fleshed out in two ways.

To begin with, your attraction to the pool may *result* from a prior desire you have. This desire could be basic, such as the desire to be cooler on a hot day, or more complexly related to your projects, such as the desire to find and swim in every pool on the mountain. Attraction to the pool is not *necessary* for you to have, or act on, the desire to swim. You might have had the desire to swim anyway and may swim despite being averse to the pool. (On account of its sharp edges, say.)

Although your attraction to the pool is not necessary for the desire to swim, it is broadly sufficient to *generate* such a desire given your existing capacities and constitution, i.e. your ability to swim or lack of reasons to avoid water (things which are not themselves reducible to desires.) Note, too, that the desire to swim need not result in action; perhaps it's late, and you need to reach shelter before nightfall.[9]

Understood by analogy with affordances, the phenomenon of attraction is a fairly involuntary way of being inclined towards things around us. These inclinations either focus our existing desires, finding specific pathways for them to result in action, or they generate new desires. In both cases, attractions are relative to our specific makeup and environment. A pool is not inviting *simpliciter*, but is inviting for you, or me; unlike other attitudes, attraction is personal and context specific. Whilst we might be able to desire some things on the basis of considered beliefs about them, our attractions generate desires that are tied more intimately to our emotions and ability to act.

Understood along these lines, to be sexually attracted to someone is to experience them as 'inviting' certain forms of sexual engagement. To be clear, the notion of invitation is metaphorical. We need not be literally *asked* to engage with someone sexually to be sexually attracted to them, just as a pool does not ask us to go swimming. Instead, sexual attraction invites certain kinds of sexual action, whether specific sexual acts, or forms of sexual attention, imagination, and fantasy.

The precise pathways of action 'invited' by a sexually attractive person can depend on our sexual desires and tastes. If we have a predilection for touching soft things, because of the sensations we enjoy, then our attraction to *him*, with his soft hair, may reflect that; analogous to the case where the prior desire to cool down means we find *that* pool to be so inviting. Or we may find our sexual attractions elicit new desires given our capacities and constitution. For example, we may be drawn to him, and be surprised when we experience the desire to touch his muscular stomach, in part because of our capacity for tactile imagination.

Often, although not always, sexual attraction to people, unlike attraction to mountain pools, is bound up with their *agency*. This is so both in the sense that our sexual attraction may be responsive to what people say and do, and not just how they look, but also because sexual attraction inclines us towards many kinds of *joint* action. For me to find him sexually attractive, for instance, is for me to want *us* to act together sexually in certain ways, and not for me to act on him. This is so even when the kinds of action sexual attractions invite us toward are mental actions, like fantasising. People often fantasise about doing things *with* others, not to them.

Asexuality is often labelled a sexual *orientation*.[10] This is because asexuality is typically understood in terms of patterns of sexual attraction, rather than experiences of desire, arousal, or sex, and because asexuality is stable and can feature as part of someone's identity. Viewed in this way, to be asexual is to be sexually attracted to no one, just as to be bisexual is to be sexually attracted to men and women.

The matter of whether asexuality actually is an orientation is complex and shaped by the fact that orientation discourse has social and political significance. Many asexual people are uneasy with being defined negatively, or in terms of absence, so they resist the idea that to be asexual is to lack a sexual orientation.[11] In our current social context, it is also easier to secure recognition and protection of a sexual identity if it can be described as an orientation. This is because 'orientation' invokes a clear, discrete, natural category. The political usefulness of orientation discourse is visible in neighbouring discussions about the status of polyamory. Ann Tweedy, for example, argues that polyamory should be described as an orientation in order to provide statutory protections for polyamorous people.[12] Some asexual people may have similar aspirations.

But the strategic value of this move may be limited. Christian Klesse, also considering polyamory, argues that 'as a normative trope, sexual orientation can be evoked to police people's desires and sexual behaviours and to reinforce rigid boundaries around identities and communities'.[13] Orientation discourse can therefore fail to reflect the complexity of polyamorous experience. Similar concerns apply with equal force to the application of orientation categories to asexuality, particularly if we view asexuality on a spectrum (see below).

The political value of claiming asexuality to be a sexual orientation comes adrift from theoretical disputes about the nature of sexual orientation. Klesse and other scholars view sexual orientations as 'western [social] constructs', whereas others think sexual orientations are anchored in biology. We lack space to intervene in this debate.[14] Asexual people have reasons to be wary of both theoretical standpoints. As we argue in Section 5, asexuals struggle to secure recognition for their distinct identity and are often erased or denigrated. On the one hand, then, if asexuality is viewed as a socially constructed orientation, it might be taken less seriously at a time when asexual people need recognition. On the other hand, the view that asexuality is biologically predetermined could oversimplify and essentialise asexual experiences.[15]

A more intriguing possibility, however, is that consideration of asexuality will shape how we think about sexual orientation. For example, Scherrer suggests that asexual identities might be similar to those of polyamorous people, or practitioners of BDSM, 'which include other dimensions of one's sexuality that may be equally (or more) important than gender of object choice'.[16] If this is right, and given sufficient theoretical grounds to describe asexuality as a sexual orientation, then we would have reason

to move away from thinking sexual orientations are orientation towards people of a particular biological sex[17] or of erotic experiences as being 'fundamentally gendered'.[18] Instead, we may end up thinking about sexual orientation in a different way altogether, deprioritising sex and/or gender, and instead focussing on patterns of attraction towards traits, behaviours, situations, or even individuals. This possibility chimes with contemporary criticisms of orientation discourse, like Klesse's, which suggest that sexual orientation categories have been overly rigid, neglected sex and gender categories beyond familiar binaries, and reflect Western values and dominance at the expense of full appreciation of sexual and romantic life. More research needs to be done and greater attention paid to the experiences of asexual people.

Since attraction to an object is not necessary for someone to have a desire to act on or with that object, it is perfectly possible that asexual people have sexual desires and may act sexually. People vary in their attitudes towards sexuality within the asexual community. Some asexual people are repulsed by sex or the idea of themselves having sex. Others are indifferent.

Importantly, however, some asexual people engage in sexual activity and many masturbate.[19] As with allosexual sexual activity, asexual people have sex for many reasons.[20] Some examples include the desire to benefit a partner, to feel close to a partner, or to relax.[21] We return to the intentional structure of such activity in the next section.

The fact that some asexual people have sex or masturbate is partial support for a general quadripartite distinction between experiencing sexual *attraction*, experiencing sexual *desire*, experiencing sexual *arousal*, and experiencing sexual *pleasure*.[22] What sexual desire is, exactly, is contested, and we shall discuss this in the next section. Broadly speaking, however, sexual desire is the urge to experience certain kinds of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is a qualitatively distinct experience that is a typical consequence of sexual arousal when accompanied by sexual desire. Sexual arousal is the physiological response in anticipation of, or engagement in, sexual activity.

Even without considering asexuality, it seems plausible that most of these four phenomena can come apart, even if they are closely associated in typical cases (see Table 1).

Noting that some asexual people have sex or masturbate only helps to reinforce the plausibility of distinguishing between sexual desire and sexual attraction.

The above distinction helps us distinguish asexuality from celibacy and disorders of desire. Asexuality is not celibacy where people refrain from sexual activity, usually

Table 1. Examples where desire, attraction, arousal, and pleasure may diverge

Present	Absent	Examples
Desire	Attraction	Masturbation, glory hole
Attraction	Desire	Some cases of immoral/taboo sexuality[74]
Desire	Arousal	Erectile dysfunction
Arousal	Desire and/or Attraction and/or Pleasure	Sexual assault[75]

voluntarily, for two reasons. First, asexuals may engage in sexual activity in the absence of sexual attraction. Second, celibates typically retain sexual attraction to other people, as well as sexual desire, which is why celibacy is often a challenge.

Asexuality should be distinguished from purported *disorders* of sexual desire, such as hypoactive sexual desire disorder where someone is distressed by their diminished sexual drive.[23] This is so for two reasons. First, asexual people may not have a diminished sexual drive at all. Second, the issue of whether someone is distressed by their sexual life is orthogonal to the issue of whether they experience attraction or not. Asexuality is sometimes defined as the absence of sexual attraction which is not experienced as *distressing*.[24] But as C J DeLuzio Chasin notes, some allosexual people can undergo changes to their sex drive without finding them distressing (indeed, these changes might bring relief), and some asexual people may be distressed by their sexual identity for exogenous reasons, especially in contexts where asexuality is marginalised, erased, or subject to ridicule.[25]

Because asexuality is defined as the absence of sexual attraction, neither the concept of an asexual celibate nor an asexual suffering from a desire disorder are pleonasms. An asexual celibate is someone who does not act on their sexual desires; an asexual with a desire disorder will find that their sexual drive has diminished, or increased, in ways they find troubling. Neither person is sexually *attracted* to other people. To know that someone is asexual, like knowing that someone is bisexual, tells us little about the strength of frequency of their sexual desires and little about their motivations for having sex if, and when, they choose to do so.

Our initial definition of asexuality can be clarified in light of recent sexuality research which brings pressure to bear on stark binary orientations and weakens the connections between orientations and behavior. Sexual attraction, desire, arousal, and activity are often said to be fluid over the lifecycle and shaped by various contextual features.[26] This means that sexual identity can change over time and might be shaped at least partly by environment. Sexual identity and behaviour are often productively viewed in terms of broad spectra, and this is also true of asexuality.[27]

Two relevant descriptive categories on the asexual spectrum are *greysexuality* and *demisexuality*.[28] Greysexuals, in the grey area between asexuality and sexuality, experience sexual attraction infrequently. Demisexuals, in contrast, experience sexual attraction only after forming an emotional bond with someone. Although not fully asexual, both groups find that attraction plays a marginal role in their lives. Attention to the breadth of the asexual spectrum allows us to avoid a stark binary between the experience of sexual attraction and the absence of such an experience. By way of comparison, a woman who is very occasionally attracted to women, but mainly attracted to men, is not fully bisexual but would fall somewhere on a spectrum of bisexuality.

Cutting across the distinction between those who experience sexual attraction and those who identify on the asexual spectrum is the separate distinction between those who experience romantic attraction, i.e. those who want to have romantic relationships, and those who do not and therefore consider themselves *aromantic*.[29] Aromatic people do not feel any pull to pursue romantic relationships or partnered life and are satisfied with friendship and singledom. Aromanticism is more than a value preference though and more akin to an orientation.[30] Some asexuals are aromantic, and some aromantics experience sexual attraction. Research suggests that between 16%[31] and 25.9% of asexuals identify as aromantic.[32] That a significant proportion of asexuals

identify as aromantic could be an indication of the connection between sexual attraction and romantic love. However, there are two things to note here: first, even if the proportion of asexuals who are aromantic is closer to 25%, this is still a minority; second, it is possible that these asexuals are not interested in romantic life because they associate romance with sex due to prevailing social norms. Were sex not so bound up with romantic love, it is possible that fewer asexuals would also identify as aromantic.

Many people on the asexual spectrum pursue romantic relationships. Most of those who do also have a romantic *orientation* and consider themselves *hetero*romantic, *homo*romantic, *bi*romantic and so on, i.e. romantically drawn to people of different, same, or both sexes.[33] Similarly, asexuals may identify as nonmonogamous for the range of reasons that allosexuals (nonasexuals) might do so, such as the desire for greater emotional fulfillment or the unwillingness to limit their ability to act on love for different people.[34] Asexual people may also embrace nonmonogamy as a way of enabling beloved allosexual partners to be sexually fulfilled.

Interestingly, more women than men identify as asexual: in Bogaert's 2004 sample, only 29% of those who identified as asexual also identified as male.[35] He provides several possible explanations for this, including that some women might have internalised the view that men should be more sexual than women or that women might be more likely to see themselves as sexual objects rather than active participants in sex.[36] More research needs to be done into the relationship between gender and asexuality, but gendered expectations about sex likely play a role in the harms suffered by asexuals (as discussed in Section 5). It is also possible that these expectations could lead some people to be mistaken about their asexuality. However, we maintain that it is better to trust, rather than distrust, people's testimony about their asexuality, particularly because women are, in general, less likely to be taken seriously with regard to their own psychology, desires, and sexual orientation than men are.

3. Sexual Desire and Sexual Attraction

To make sense of the idea that some asexual people have sex, we embraced the idea that sexual desire is not always accompanied by sexual attraction. This idea may seem implausible, for you might wonder what sexual desires aim at in cases where they are not accompanied by sexual attraction. Isn't sexual desire the desire for sexual activity with *someone* else, and isn't attraction necessary for that?

In this section, we examine asexual sexual experiences in more detail to describe the intentional directedness of some of their typical desires. We shall then suggest that these experiences, and the broader attempt to separate sexual desire from sexual attraction, is more compatible with some contemporary theories of sexual desire than it is with others.

Recent research into the masturbatory life of asexual people helps us better understand the connections between desire and attraction. Although masturbation does not involve other people, the intentional structure of people's fantasies and desires in these contexts helps us understand sexual desire more generally, including during partnered sexual activity, and how it relates to sexual attraction.

In one of the best studies to date, Morag Yule and colleagues stressed that the behaviour of asexual and allosexual people was quite similar; that, 'nearly half of

asexual women and three quarters of asexual men reported both experiencing sexual fantasy and masturbating, despite reporting a lack of sexual attraction to other people and identifying as asexual'.[37] This is good additional evidence for our broad distinction between desire, arousal, and pleasure on the one hand, and sexual attraction on the other. Several features of this research are noteworthy. First, asexual sexual desire is often not directed towards anyone. Second, when it does have a focus, such desire is (1) usually depersonalised and (2) focuses on situations, roles, or scenarios (we shall call this 'configurational' desire).

In some cases, asexual people report that their arousal and sexual desire is 'nondirected', i.e. it does not focus on anything or anyone.[38] As an interviewee of an online magazine put it:

> I don't so much fantasize as much as I focus on how my body is feeling and listen to music and create a space for me to enjoy my body. It's more about taking the time to relax. It isn't spontaneous; I plan when to have my sessions. It's a time to let my body and mind unwind and not focus on anything else other than the little bubble I have for myself.[39]

These experiences, where bodily sensation takes centre stage, are a feature of allosexual sexual life too.

Other asexual people do experience sexual desire and fantasy in a more directed way. Here, two different participants from Yule's study describe their fantasies:

> I do have sexual fantasies but most of the time they do not involve me or any real person. I sexually fantasize about fictional male couples and their romantic and sexual relationships and events.

> I don't put myself into my fantasies. That is thoroughly unappealing to me. Instead, I imagine other people in sexual situations, and focus on their thoughts and feelings for a sort of vicarious arousal. I don't want to do anything sexual with any of the people I imagine, and by themselves, they don't turn me on.[40]

These descriptions are characteristic of the available literature. Two features are clear. First, although their desire and fantasy does focus on something other than bodily sensation, it is abstract and disconnected from their agential perspective.[41] Indeed, in the study of Yule *et al*. 'the largest distinguishing feature between fantasies of asexual individuals compared to sexual individuals was the former's increased likelihood of having sexual fantasies that did not involve them'.[42] Bogaert coined the term 'autochorissexuality' to describe this kind of sexuality which involves a disconnection between the object of someone's desire and their sense of self.[43] Second, these desires and fantasies seem *configurational*; they focus on different patterns of interaction between people, rather than on the sexual response of individuals.

This kind of desire, in which individual characteristics and genital sexuality are less important than roles or arrangements, makes the expressions of sexual desire of some asexual people very similar to expressions of desire in people who are interested in specific forms of kink culture or BDSM. Indeed, asexual and allosexual people seem to fantasise about BDSM and kink to the same extent.[44] The interplay between these two identities is likely to be complex, and in need of further research, but the parallels

Table 2. Philosophical accounts of sexual desire

The Account	Conception of sexual desire	Does desire individuate?	The status of sexual attraction
Plainer Sex (Igor Primoratz)	'desire for certain bodily pleasures'[76]	No	Attraction is an additional attitude
Plain Sex (Alan Goldman)	'desire for contact with another person's body and for the pleasure which such contact produces.'[77]	Yes (in a thin sense)	Attraction is an additional attitude
Acts and Arousal (Rockney Jacobson)	The 'object of [sexual desire] is an act or activity of an agent desired in virtue of certain effects which that activity has (or is taken by the agent to have) on her states of sexual arousal; the relevant features of the activity which make it desirable are that it will (or is taken to be an activity which will) initiate, heighten, sustain, or assuage states of sexual arousal.'[78]	No	Attraction is an additional attitude
Weak Intentionalism (Seiriol Morgan)	A bodily appetite with 'potential intentionality', which is 'essentially *open* to significance'.[79]	Potentially	Sexual attraction *could* be *part of* sexual desire or an additional attitude
Strong Intentionalism (Roger Scruton)	Sexual desire has 'individualizing intentionality', 'the aim [of which] is "union with the other", where "the other" denotes a particular person, with a particular perspective on [their] actions.'[80]	Yes	Sexual attraction is necessarily part of sexual desire
Strong Intentionalism (Robert Solomon)	Sexuality has 'an essential bodily dimension, and this might well be described as the "incarnation" or "submersion" of a person into his body. The end of this desire is interpersonal communication'.[81]	Yes	Sexual attraction is a necessarily part of sexual desire (we think)

between the two further motivate our point, mentioned above, that 'asexuality' can be a misleading term. Instead, what is common to asexual people and people who pursue a kink and/or BDSM lifestyle, is that sexual desire, where present, may not be lensed through sexual attraction, which centres on individuals, but instead is animated by other forms of attraction and interest, e.g. to structural role configurations (dominant and submissive), specific scenes and situations (humiliation), or towards certain kinds of material (latex, fur).

In summary, this emerging research suggests that asexual people frequently experience sexual desire, but it is either decoupled from any interest in people, or its intentional focus settles not on individuals, but on other situations. The connection between sexual desire and sexual attraction is therefore fluid and loose.

We have not committed to a theory of sexual desire, because our primary concern was to describe and understand how asexual people describe their sexual life. What is clear, however, is that some contemporary accounts of what constitutes what sexual desire is a desire for, will fare better than others when it comes to accommodating asexuality, the distinction between sexual desire and sexual attraction, and the variation internal to sexual desire itself.

Table 2 sets out, in brief, some of the main theories of sexual desire, ordered in terms of how complex they understand the intentionality of desire to be. Views which suggest sexual desire is necessarily oriented towards people as individuals, like Roger Scruton's, will struggle to accommodate the phenomena we have mentioned above and seem to blur together sexual attraction and sexual desire. Such blurring means that these accounts cannot recognise asexuality, since asexuality may involve sexual desire while lacking sexual attraction. (Although reductionist in character, if Alan Goldman's view regards sexual desire as focused on a *specific* individual (*de re*), as it seems to do, it would be similarly problematic.)

Asexuality is best accommodated by accounts of sexual desire in which a person's individuating intentionality is either absent or viewed as a contingent feature. Primoratz's 'plain sex' account and Jacobson's account are instances of the former. They can capture cases where asexual people have sex or masturbate to experience bodily sensations, but they will struggle to accommodate cases where an asexual person's sexual desire is oriented to fictional characters or configurations of people.

Morgan's account of sexual desire seems to best capture the diversity of sexual desire and its complex relationship to sexual attraction. On his view, sexual desire is not essentially individuating, but it can assume different kinds of intentional focus depending on the context and a person's inclinations. In some cases, sexual desire is desire for bodily pleasure; in others, the desire relies on 'complex cognitive capacities and intentional awareness, which often reach out to cultural and personal meanings associated with individuals, objects and situations'.[45] His view can therefore accommodate cases where sexual desire is the result of sexual attraction, cases where attraction is absent, and cases where other kinds of attraction are playing a role.

Although we cannot argue for this here, we think the compatibility between some accounts of sexual desire, and asexual sexuality, may serve as *evidence* for the plausibility of some theories of desire, particularly Morgan's view. In itself, this is a reason why attending to the experiences of asexual people may benefit philosophers of sexuality. That said, we recognise it is open to critics to suggest that they have identified a distinct *normative* category of sexual desire which either subsumes or presupposes sexual

attraction. Viewed in that way, sexual desire in the absence of attraction may be possible, but it would be deficient. Though we do not share that view, a full defence of the idea is outside the scope of this article; however, we suggest what a response may look like in the next section.

4. Forms of Attraction

Central to asexual discourse is the idea that sexual attraction can come apart from other forms of sexual and romantic behaviour. This separation is required in order to make sense of some asexual people's sexual activity. A worry that this distinction may generate is that such sexual or romantic activity is overly impersonal; that even if we accept that sexual desire can exist, and be satisfied in the absence of sexual attraction, any such encounter is missing something.

If we are broadly right in our analysis of attraction as an affordance-like inclination towards things, then this worry can be expressed as the concern that asexual sexual behaviour seems impersonal, since any sexual desires are not lensed through the experience of attraction, which helps to orient people in quick, automatic, and focused ways to what is around them.

This worry neglects a point emphasised frequently within asexual discourse; namely, that sexual attraction is just one form of attraction amongst others. As Julie Decker puts it,

> Plenty of nonsexual and nonromantic kinds of attraction exist, including aesthetic, sensual, intellectual and various kinds of emotional attraction. These can crop up independently of each other or in association with other kinds of attraction, and these elements can be intense, deep, and multifaceted.[46]

These forms of attraction can animate a life and shape someone's orientation to other people in the absence of any accompanying sexual attraction. Jenn, an asexual interviewee in a survey conducted by Kristin Scherrer, articulates this idea clearly,

> I just don't feel sexual attraction to people. I love the human form and can regard individuals as works of art and find people aesthetically pleasing, but I don't ever want to come into sexual contact with even the most beautiful of people.[47]

Nora, another interviewee, describes her own attractions:

> Since sexual attraction is not a factor, then it doesn't make sense that gender would play that much of a role in who I am attracted to. I am attracted to personality, and when I am attracted to someone, I want to be around them, spend time with them.[48]

Most human attraction is probably nonsexual. As the phenomenon of friendship illustrates, we can be drawn to clever, funny, beautiful, or emotionally vivacious people and indifferent to those who lack these qualities, without being *sexually* or romantically drawn to those people.[49] Our attraction to people is akin to our attraction to works of art. Some works are beautiful, we want to look at them; other works are conceptually engaging, or emotionally provocative, but aesthetically sterile; other works might be

tactile and invite touch. We can be drawn towards, and want to spend time with, different works of art without finding them attractive in the same way.

As with our analysis of sexual attraction, some of these attractions can be anchored in existing desires or interests. Some of these may focus on projects, as when we are drawn to someone due to a shared philosophical focus, or because they too are a committed athlete. Other attractions may stem from sensory modalities that resonate with us, as when we are drawn to be tactile towards some people but not others, or playful with some people, but not others.

Recognising that attraction takes different forms is important for at least three reasons. In the first instance, we need to dispel the ideal that 'attraction' is shorthand for specifically sexual attraction.[50] As we have suggested already, we do not think people are attracted to things *simpliciter*, but attracted in some respect, and sexuality is clearly not the only respect in which we can be attracted to people. Neglect of this point has contributed to the marginalisation and erasure of asexual experiences and is related closely to the mistaken view of asexual sexuality, romance, and interpersonal life as impoverished and lacking. (We return to this concern in the next section.)

Second, attention to the richness of human attraction is a key aspect of making sense of asexual romantic life – something which seems oxymoronic to many people. Romantic love, and romantic life in general, can be animated around experiences of attraction which are not sexual. Many of these experiences, such as being drawn to someone's beauty, the comportment of their body, their distinct motility, their tactile nature, their playfulness, and so on, are arguably integral to a more complete understanding of erotic life.[51]

Finally, awareness of attraction's diverse forms may form one component of an answer to the outstanding normative worries, alluded to in the section above, that sexual activity in the absence of sexual attraction is (a) insufficiently individualising or intimate of (b) insufficiently enjoyable. A critic, perhaps someone like Roger Scruton, whose conception of sexual desire we described above, could concede that sexual desire and sexual attraction can come apart, whilst suggesting that the latter is necessary if sexual engagement with someone is not to be impersonal and potentially objectifying.[52] Or someone might think that sexual activity without sexual attraction cannot be enjoyable in the right kind of ways. This is not the place to engage fully with these normative arguments, which also apply to other forms of sexual behaviour (such as sex work).[53] However, recognition of asexual discourse around attraction, and reflection on the phenomenology of attraction, allows us to gesture to a possible response to the worry.

We could concede, for the sake of argument, that attraction plays an important role in individuating people in sexual and romantic life and in making relationships intimate and that the world-narrowing experience of being attracted to people is an important form of enjoyment.[54] Then, in a second step, we point out that sexual attraction is not the only form of attraction that can play this role. Other kinds of attraction may be sufficient. We can find someone beautiful, beguiling, funny, charismatic, and so on, without finding them sexually attractive as such, and yet those forms of attraction are more than enough to animate a sexual encounter and ensure that the other person is foregrounded in one's attention. What is more, these other forms of attraction could be what makes sexual activity enjoyable, even in the absence of sexual attraction.[55]

We hope this somewhat allays another, related worry, which is that the promotion of the idea that sexual attraction is not necessary for sex to be enjoyable could lead to asexuals feeling pressured to engage in sexual activity which is not enjoyable to them and that this pressure is most likely to fall along gendered lines, with allosexual men pressurising their asexual female partners to have sex with them. To be clear, we argue only that sex *can be* enjoyable in the absence of sexual attraction. No one should have sex they do not want or do not find enjoyable.

These claims are not definitive, of course, but they do place the onus on others to specify what is so significant about sexual attraction, in particular, such that its absence in romantic or sexual life is cause for concern in cases where people experience other kinds of attraction.

5. Asexuality: Harm and Injustice

Although there is nothing harmful about asexuality in itself, asexual people do often experience certain prejudices, harms, and injustice. In many cases, these harms are linked directly to the kinds of misunderstanding about asexuality we have dispelled earlier, e.g. that it is akin to celibacy or desire disorders. In this section, we briefly outline some of these harms in order to highlight the ethical issues raised by the failure to understand asexuality or take it seriously.

We break these harms down into: (a) harms caused by the erasure of asexuality and (b) harms caused by the denigration of asexuality. Both erasure and denigration occur against the background of what Emens calls 'compulsory sexuality': 'the pervasive cultural assumption…that everyone is defined by some kind of sexual attraction'.[56] In addition, erasure and denigration of asexuality take place within a social context in which there are further norms around hypersexualisation of some groups, such as gay men, and the desexualisation of others, such as children, people with disabilities, and the elderly.[57] This social context needs to be taken into account when thinking about how asexuality is often responded to.

5.1 Erasure

Asexuality has been pathologized extensively.[58] As we outlined above, it has been linked with 'frigidity' and other disorders of sexuality, meaning that, to many people, it cannot exist as an orientation. More broadly, asexuality has been subject to pervasive *stereotypes* (for example, to be asexual is, really, to be 'repressed', 'confused', 'secretly gay', and so on). In some contexts, this renders asexuality invisible because it is presumed to be impossible – rather than being just something that ought not to be (like homosexuality), it is seen as something that does not exist. This erasure is harmful for several reasons; here we discuss two: hermeneutical injustice and silencing.

Firstly, it is a form of what Miranda Fricker has termed *hermeneutical injustice* which is 'the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutic resource'.[59] Asexual people might struggle to make sense of their own experiences, and nonasexual people might find it difficult to understand asexual identities, because the language to describe and interpret them is not available. If every

time an asexual person tries to explain that they do not ever feel attracted to anyone, they are told that they must be 'confused' and that there is no such thing as asexuality; it will be almost impossible for them to make sense of their own asexuality and to have it recognised by others for what it is.

Therefore, in order to convince people of the existence of asexuality, asexuals might present themselves as not having any other reason for not wanting sex:

> The people featured publicly as "real" asexuals are typically also white, well educated, articulate, and comfortably middle or upper-middle class. Those of us within the asexual/ace community know which people will be most effective at convincing a sceptical audience that asexuality exists. They are not trans-identified, teenagers, or people with a history of abuse, even though most trans people, most adolescents, and most people who have been subject to abuse are not asexual. The most convincing poster child is not someone with a physical or mental disability because people with disabilities are already frequently denied a sexuality of their own.[60]

Thus, if you are White, well-educated, and middle- or upper-class people, you are more likely to be believed if you claim to be asexual because there is no plausible 'excuse' for why you would not find others sexually attractive. Conversely, if others can find an excuse from other parts of your life for why you might not find others sexually attractive, such as that you have suffered trauma or that others will not likely find you sexually attractive, they are more likely to disbelieve that you are really asexual. Asexual people with histories of abuse or disabilities, therefore, might find it almost impossible to convince others that they are asexual.

Emens quotes an asexual woman who has listed what she sees as the 'top ten most common misconceptions' about asexuals:

(10) "You hate men."
(9) "You can't get a man."
(8) "You have a hormone problem."
(7) "You're overly involved in your busy life."
(6) "You just never had me in your bed."
(5) "You are afraid of getting into a relationship."
(4) "You were sexually abused as a child."
(3) "You are a lesbian."
(2) "You just haven't met the right guy."
(1) "You just got out of a bad relationship."[61]

Emens writes that these sorts of comments 'plague many asexuals', and she also notes some of them, such as 'you just haven't met the right guy' are very similar, or indeed the same, as those made about homosexuals and bisexuals.[62] She also draws parallels between the erasure of asexuality through these kinds of assumptions and the erasure of bisexuality (people, for example, sometimes assume that bisexuals just haven't come out as gay yet or are in denial). The erasure of asexuality no doubt has an impact on the number of people who identify as asexual. Although approximately 1% of people surveyed by Bogaert said they had never felt sexually attracted to anyone, a smaller percentage of people actually identify as asexual. This could be, in part at least,

because many people simply haven't heard of asexuality or ever met anyone who identifies as asexual.[63]

Secondly, in the context of romantic and sexual negotiation, the erasure of asexuality generates a kind of *silencing* which makes it impossible to refuse sexual advances (and be free of harassment) *on the grounds of asexuality*. It's not just 'no means yes', but that 'no' is not heard. This is shown quite clearly in the 'top ten misconceptions' above. Following the refusal of a sexual advance on the grounds of asexuality with something like 'you've just never had me in your bed' makes a clear statement that the refuser is either not being heard or not being believed about their asexuality. In the worst cases, this can lead to sexual assault, and Julie Decker writes that asexuals are at a higher risk of 'corrective rape'.[64] She herself, after discussing her asexuality on YouTube, has been told that she 'just needs a good raping'.[65]

5.2. Denigration

Even if asexuality is accepted as possible in some minimal sense, in some contexts, asexuals might still find that their struggles are not taken seriously. Emens quotes the sex columnist, Dan Savage, who said in an interview for a documentary about asexuality:

> It's funny to think about. You know, you've got the gays marching for the right to be cocksucking homosexuals, and then you have the asexuals marching for the right to – not do anything. Which is hilarious. Look, you didn't need to march for that right. You just need to stay home, and not do anything.[66]

Although, as Emens acknowledges, asexuals have not been punished by the law in a comparable way to homosexuals, they are nonetheless discriminated against. Indeed, she cites research that suggests that heterosexuals perhaps show even greater bias towards asexuals than towards homosexuals and bisexuals.[67] Indeed, the lack of recognition of the prejudice and discrimination faced by asexuals further compounds the prejudice.

Furthermore, asexuality is often denigrated as 'immaturity', a 'waste of potential', or 'a pitiful existence'. Developing one's sexuality is seen as a crucial part of becoming an adult, with people who remain virgins beyond their teenage years sometimes being viewed with a degree of suspicion or pity. For asexuals who have never had sex, they might find that people demand an explanation as to why, feel sorry for them, and hope that they change their minds so that they can experience sex.

Jessica Begon provides a good example of how even the most liberally minded philosophers can assume that sexual satisfaction is a necessary part of a life well-lived. She explains how Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach – an approach to thinking about wellbeing in terms of opportunities to perform certain functionings – leaves out asexual people because Nussbaum 'includes "having opportunities for sexual satisfaction" as part of the capability for bodily integrity'.[68] For Nussbaum, what is important is not just that sexual activity is performed, but that it is done for the right reasons, i.e. for sexual satisfaction. However, as Begon notes, some asexuals 'will be *incapable* of sexual satisfaction' or simply not desire it. As Nussbaum seeks to develop a list of central capabilities by overlapping consensus, then asexual people pose a

problem for her approach, since in no hypothetical future scenario will (some) asexuals agree that opportunities for sexual satisfaction will be necessary for their life to go well. Thus, Begon argues, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach asks asexual individuals to agree that the ability to perform a functioning of which they are incapable is essential to any dignified life.[69] Of course, Nussbaum could take 'opportunities for sexual satisfaction' out of her list, but our point here is not to analyse Nussbaum's or indeed any Capabilities Approach to wellbeing. Rather, what this example shows is how widespread the view is that sexual satisfaction is part of a life well-lived, and thus how difficult it can be for asexuals to argue that their life is not deficient because it does not involve sexual attraction.

Both common attitudes towards sexuality and more philosophical elaborations of them presuppose that sexual expression, and eventual competence and liberation, is integral to human flourishing.[70] These attitudes are typically teleological: sexual maturity is regarded as a developmental goal, and they often retain a narrow conception of what human sexuality involves.

Instead of assuming that sexuality is central to human life, however, and merely disputing its proper limits, we can critique this assumption itself. For some asexual people, sexuality is not central to their flourishing lives. As we have also seen in our discussion of sexual attraction and sexual desire, attention to the experiences of asexuals who *do* have sex also broadens our understanding of sexuality. So not only is sexuality not necessary to flourish, but the range of sexuality that might contribute to a specific person's flourishing, is itself broader than people suppose.

Some asexuals might find that their intimate life as a whole is pathologized, viewed as deficient, or not taken seriously. Asexual people who identify as homoromantic or biromantic might face disbelief that their identity is 'possible' because homosexuality and bisexuality are frequently oversexualised. For aromantic asexuals, amatonormativity – the social prioritisation of romantic love over other kinds of caring relationship[71]– will have a negative impact on how seriously their nonromantic caring relationships will be taken. Amatonormativity is also a problem for romantic asexuals too, because asexual romantic relationships might be conflated with friendships, and friendship is devalued because of amatornomativity. The view that marriage must involve sex brings marriage and asexuality into tension. This tension exists formally in many jurisdictions, like the United Kingdom and some states of America, where opposite-sex marriages are considered 'voidable' and can be annulled if they are unconsummated'.[72] People who do not want to have sex are thus defined out of nonvoidable marriage, which is arguably harmful if marriage is viewed as a way of expressing and supporting committed romantic love.

Asexual people may also be regarded with suspicion for other reasons, which we can only allude to here. First, when sexuality is so central to modern life, various kinds of refusal, resistance, or reticence can seem radical, even dangerous. Asexuals may relate uneasily to attempts to use sexual attraction or desire to sell consumer goods or state-supported procreative sex. It might also be supposed that since asexual people do not have to manage sexual attraction or activity, they are therefore free from patriarchal spheres of control which rely on such dimensions of sexuality. Second, given the central importance attributed to sexual attraction in modern life, and the reduction of all attractions to sexual attraction, the absence of sexual attraction may be mistaken for dispassionateness, or a lack of concern for others.

These suspicions are often tinged with patronising envy: 'at least you don't have to deal with unwanted attention.' But they are mistaken. Although it is true that asexual experience does help cast a critical perspective on many social norms and institutions, their experiences are diverse as any other group. Some asexual people will struggle with sexual desire or other forms of attraction; some will have children; some will embrace consumerism or political conservatism. As we have seen, too, oppression does not track sexual attraction, and in many cases, patriarchal rage is more pronounced when people identify as asexual.

As with any social denigration, asexual oppression will intersect with, and compound, other forms of prejudice, and discrimination may compound. Additional stereotypes of hypersexual masculinity, or pathologized desexualisation, can make it especially hard for certain groups, e.g. Black men or disabled women, to be corroborated in their identity as asexual. Or a queer-romantic asexual woman may find themselves experiencing accentuated male anger. For not only are they unavailable to men in virtue of the specific *trajectory* of their sexual attractions, as with other queer women, their asexuality means they might be sexually unavailable *simpliciter*, not even as the object of heterosexual fantasy.

6. Conclusion

Our aim in this article was to provide the beginnings of an account of asexuality in order to start addressing its practical and theoretical neglect. We accepted several commonly held claims about asexuality: that asexuality is defined as the absence of sexual attraction; that some asexual people experience sexual desire and may have sex; that attraction is more diverse than just sexual attraction; and that asexual people experience prejudice and harm. Our account was shaped by some similarities between asexual experiences and other forms of minority sexual expression, such as BDSM, and by the guiding intimation that both romantic life, and human sexuality, are much more complex and richly animated than most theoretical treatments suppose.

We explained how sexual attraction and sexual desire can differ by giving an affordance-like account of the former. With that distinction in hand, we then suggested that some philosophical theories of sexual desire can accommodate asexual experiences more easily than others, i.e. those which do not require sexual desire to be intentionally focused on a specific person. We then argued that closer attention to the other forms of attraction people experience can help rebuff objections levelled at asexual romance: that romantic relationships require sexual attraction or that asexual sexual activity must be insufficiently focused on a specific person and thus be potentially objectifying or harmful. Finally, we explained how asexual people suffer persistent hermeneutical injustice and the harmful erasure or denigration of their experiences.

In our hypersexualised society, it can be easy to overlook or downplay the experiences of asexual people. Philosophically, this oversight may be exacerbated by attempts to resuscitate the philosophy of love and to think more about sexual life. But to disregard asexuality is to produce incomplete or inaccurate accounts of sexuality and romantic life. More disturbingly, this neglect perpetuates serious harm to asexual people.

Fundamentally, people love, care about, are attracted to, and experience pleasure with other people in copious ways. Romantic flourishing is also varied. Wider acknowledgment of these facts is required urgently, in the academy and beyond.[73]

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NOTES

1 Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*. (Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), p. 13. More research is needed to fully appreciate how many people may lie on the asexual spectrum.
2 For an exemplary list of asexual resources, from research papers to YouTube channels, see chapter six of Julie Decker *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*, (Skyhorse Publishing, 2015)
3 This is the view of the influential Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), an online-based resource for people identifying with, or interested in, asexuality. It is also the view shared by most researchers into asexuality, including Meg-John Barker *Rewriting the Rules: An anti-self help guide to love, sex and relationships* 2nd ed, (Routledge 2018); Anthony Bogaert, 'What Asexuality Tells Us About Sexuality.' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46, 3, (2017); Lori Brotto and Morag Yule 'Asexuality: Sexual orientation, paraphilia, sexual dysfunction, or none of the above?' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46, 3 (2017): 619-627. C. D. Chasin, 'Reconsidering asexuality and its radical potential', *Feminist Studies*, 39, 2 (2013): 405-426, at p. 405; Decker op cit., and Andrew Hinderliter, 'How is asexuality different from hypoactive sexual desire disorder?' *Psychology & Sexuality*, 4, 2 (2013): 167-178. For some background on how this definition became predominant, see Hinderliter op cit. pp. 170-72.
4 Anthony Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*. (Rowman & Littlefield 2015), p. 11
5 We also think an analysis in terms of dispositions to act is similarly too direct. For example, in the course of their discussion of sexual orientation, Robin Dembroff defines sexual attraction as 'shorthand for dispositions to engage in sexual behaviours' ('What is Sexual Orientation?' *Philosophers' Imprint* 16, 3 (2016), p. 7). This may also be too restrictive if 'behaviour' is understood only in terms of physical actions. Mental actions, like imagining or reminiscing, are equally as important.
6 The notion of an affordance is central to the ecological psychology of James Gibson and developed most fully in his book *The Ecological Approaches to Visual Perception* (New York, NY: Psychology Press 1979). For present purposes, our argument is that attraction seems very much *like* our sensitivity to affordances, and this helps us understand its relationship to desire and action, as well as helping us develop the notion, below, that there are different kinds of attraction. We do not require, as a premise in our argument, the claim that attraction *is* sensitivity to affordances.
7 Tom McClelland, 'The mental affordance hypothesis.' *Mind*, 129, 514, (2020) pp. 401-427.
8 McClelland, op cit., p.407. McClelland, who uses 'solicit' rather than 'invite', explains this in terms of action *potentiation*, i.e. the fact that encounters with some objects, like a door handle, or soft cat, seems to 'prime' us to act in certain ways, e.g. to grasp or stroke (op cit., p. 411).
9 Below we suggest that attraction to something need not always generate a desire to act. But our discussion of asexuality does not hinge on this issue. Our main focus is to show that there is a complex relationship between being attracted to things and desiring to act and that the latter does not require the former.
10 Anthony Bogaert, 'Toward a conceptual understanding of asexuality', *Review of General Psychology*, 10,3, (2006) at p. 241; Brotto & Yule op cit.; Decker op cit. p. 4
11 Anthony Bogaert, 'Asexuality: What it is and why it matters', *Journal of Sex Research*, 52, 4, (2015b): 362-379, at p. 363-4
12 Ann Tweedy, 'Polyamory as a sexual orientation.' *University of Cincinnati. Law. Review.*, 79, (2010), at p. 1461

13 Christian Klesse, 'Polyamory: Intimate practice, identity or sexual orientation?'. *Sexualities*, 17, 1-2, (2014) pp.81-99, at p. 95.
14 For discussion, see, for example, William Wilkerson, 'Is it a choice? Sexual orientation as interpretation.' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40, 1 (2009): 97-116.; Dembroff, op cit.; Esa Díaz-León, 'Sexual Orientation as Interpretation? Sexual Desires, Concepts, and Choice.' *Journal of Social Ontology*, 3, 2, (2017): 231-248.
15 For instance, some definitions of asexuality think *self-identification* as asexual is as a necessary and perhaps sufficient feature (Chasin op cit.). See also Randi Gressgård, 'Asexuality: from pathology to identity and beyond', *Psychology & Sexuality*, 4:2 (2013) pp. 179-192.
16 Kristin Scherrer, 'Coming to an asexual identity: Negotiating identity, negotiating desire.' *Sexualities*, 11, 5 (2008): 5621-641 at p. 636
17 Kathleen Stock, 'Sexual Orientation: What Is It?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 119, 3, (2019): 295–319
18 Talia Bettcher, 'When Selves Have Sex: What the Phenomenology of Trans Sexuality Can Teach Us About Sexual Orientation.' *Journal of Homosexuality* 61,5 (2014): 605-620, at p. 606.
19 Anthony Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, at p. 58 and *passim*; Lori Brotto et. al. 'Asexuality: A mixed-methods approach.' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 39, 3 (2010): 599-618; Morag Yule et. al. 'Sexual fantasy and masturbation among asexual individuals: An in-depth exploration.' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46, 1 (2017): 311-328. See also the testimonies of asexual people in Suzannah Weiss, 2018. 'People Who Identify as Asexual Reveal What Their Sex Lives Are Actually Like.' [online] *Bustle* (2018). Available at: https://www.bustle.com/p/asexual-people-can-have-sex-lives-heres-what-theyre-like-2436642 [Accessed 11 Dec. 2018].
20 We cannot argue here for the idea that this is *normatively* unproblematic, but we think it is. For arguments, see Seiriol Morgan, 'Sex in the Head'. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 20, 1 (2003) and Raja Halwani and Alan Soble, 'Introduction: The Analytic Categories of the Philosophy of Sex.' In: Raja Halwani et. al. eds. *The Philosophy of Sex*. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).
21 Mark Carrigan, 'There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community.' *Sexualities*, 14. 4 (2011) pp. 462-478; Decker op cit.; Weiss op cit.
22 The divergence of sexual desire and sexual arousal in women has recently been a topic of study. See Lisa Diamond, *Sexual fluidity*. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Emily Nagoski, *Come as you are: The surprising new science that will transform your sex life*. (Simon and Schuster, 2015).
23 Hinderliter op cit. By this we mean a general desire for sexual activity.
24 Karli Cerankowski and Megan Milks 'New orientations: Asexuality and its implications for theory and practice', *Feminist Studies*, 36, 3, (2010): 650-664.
25 Chasin op cit.
26 Diamond op cit.; Lisa Diamond, 'Sexual fluidity in male and females.' *Current Sexual Health Reports*, 8,4 (2016): 249-256; Jane Ward, *Not gay: Sex between straight white men*. (New York: NYU Press, 2015).
27 In other words, it is important to recognise that 'there is considerable diversity among the asexual community in the needs and experiences often associated with sexuality including relationships, attraction, and arousal' (AVEN).
28 Decker, op cit. pp. 36-41
29 Barker, op cit. pp. 110-111; Scherrer op cit. Some think this distinction results from an underlying difference between two separate evolutionary mechanisms: sexual desire and romantic bonding (Lisa Diamond, 'What does sexual orientation orient? A biobehavioral model distinguishing romantic love and sexual desire', *Psychological Review*, 110,1 (2003), p. 173.)
30 Ellen Van Houdenhove, et. al. 'Stories About Asexuality: A Qualitative Study on Asexual Women', *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 41,3 (2015): 262-281
31 Tristan Miller, 'Analysis of the 2011 Asexual Awareness Week Community Census.' Age, 13, 15, (2011) 5–13. Retrieved from www.asexua lawarenessweek.com/census/SiggyAnalysis-AAWCensus.pdf
32 Mary Ginoza and Tristan Miller 'The ACE Community Survey 2014'. Available at: https://asexualcensus.wordpress.com/2014/11/17/cross-orientations-among-non-aces/ [Accessed 20 Mar. 2019]
33 Similarly, some also identify as *grey*romantic or *demi*romantic (Decker op cit. p. 26).
34 Decker op cit. p. 33; Kristin Scherrer. 'Asexual relationships: What does asexuality have to do with polyamory?', In *Understanding non-monogamies* (pp. 166-171). (Routledge 2010)
35 Anthony Bogaert, 'Asexuality: Prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample.' *Journal of Sex Research*, 41,3, (2004): 279-287 at p. 283

36 *Ibid* pp. 284-5
37 Morag Yule et. al., 'Sexual fantasy and masturbation among asexual individuals: An in-depth exploration.' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46, 1 (2017): 326
38 Anthony Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, at p. 61
39 Helaina Hovitz, 'We Asked Asexuals What They Fantasize About' [online] *Vice*. (2016) Available at: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mgv4wy/we-asked-asexuals-what-they-fantasize-about [Accessed 8 Jul. 2020]
40 Op cit. p. 316
41 Anthony Bogaert, 'Asexuality and autochorissexualism (identity-less sexuality).' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 41,6 (2012) pp. 1513-1514; Yule op cit.
42 Op cit. p.325
43 Anthony Bogaert, 'Asexuality and autochorissexualism (identity-less sexuality).'
44 Yule et. al. op cit p. 316
45 Morgan op cit. p. 7
46 Decker op cit. p. 24
47 Scherrer op cit. p. 626
48 *Ibid* p. 635
49 Carrigan, op cit.
50 This kind of slippage is visible even in important recent scholarly work on asexuality, such as Elizabeth Emens article, 'Compulsory Sexuality' when she uses phrases like 'asexual identity turns on the lack of attraction' before proceeding to talk about *sexual* attraction as 'Compulsory sexuality'. *Stanford. Law. Review*. 66 (2014) p. 316).
51 This is the view of Ela Przybylo, who suggests that 'asexuality is an unmined provocation of erotic possibilities, a theoretical, affective, and relational challenge to imagining what can be' (op cit. p. 20). Their expansive account of Eros is based on the idea that 'the erotic fuels sexual desire rather than sexual desire being at the base of the erotic' (op cit. p. 22). We are sympathetic to the idea that sexual desire can be the consequence of forms of attraction other than sexual attraction, but we worry that such an expansive account of Eros has reduced explanatory value.
52 Martha Nussbaum, 'Objectification', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 24,4 (1995): 249-291.
In particular, we have in mind Martha Nussbaum's fourth conception of objectification-as-fungibility (op cit. p. 257). Someone might worry that to have sex with someone to whom you are not attracted is to treat them as replaceable with someone else.
53 For example, we cannot consider arguments which try to connect sexual attraction to sex that is consented to or desired.
54 Things are unlikely to be so straightforward. For example, it seems plausible that the question of whether attraction, of any kind, underpins an encounter is orthogonal to the question of whether the encounter is intimate. Sexual attraction is certainly not *sufficient* for intimate sex.
55 To express this idea more abstractly, we suggest that not all attraction to an activity, and the pleasure we take from it, must be an attraction or pleasure which is *unique to*, or which *typifies*, that activity. We might enjoy dancing the tango, say, because it is fun and sensual, not because we are drawn to a certain mode of bodily movement or genre of music. We might appreciate those in a more abstract way or remain indifferent to them. The desirability of dancing the tango is not determined solely in terms of whether people are attracted to the unique forms of movement that typify the tango.
56 Emens op cit. p. 306, fn.6
57 Przybylo op cit.
58 Eunjung Kim 'Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy.' In Cerankowski, K.J. and Milks, M. eds., *Asexualities: Feminist and queer perspectives*, (Routledge, 2014)
59 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2007) p. 155
60 Chasin op cit. p. 418
61 Emens op cit. pp. 21-22
62 Ibid p. 22
63 Ibid
64 Decker op cit. pp. 61-62

65 Abi Hooper, 'Men say I need a good raping: Asexual woman shares her experience' [online] *Closer*. (2013) Available at: https://closeronline.co.uk/real-life/news/men-say-need-good-raping-asexual-woman-shares-experience/ [Accessed 3 Jul. 2020]
66 Emens op cit. p. 43
67 Ibid p. 45
68 Jessica Begon, 'Capabilities for All? From Capabilities to Function, to Capabilities to Control', *Social Theory and Practice*, 43,1. (2017) p. 164
69 Ibid p. 166
70 Megan Milks, 'Stunted growth: Asexual politics and the rhetoric of sexual liberation.' In Cerankowski, K.J. and Milks, M. eds., *Asexualities: Feminist and queer perspectives*, (Routledge 2014)
71 Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)
72 Emens op cit. p. 350
73 Thanks to: anonymous reviewers both for this journal and others for very detailed and helpful feedback: audiences at the Society for Applied Philosophy Conference 2019, the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotions Conference 2019, and the IDEA Centre Research Seminar 2019 for useful and constructive comments and to Hichem Naar and Alison Toop for reading an earlier version of this article. Luke would like to thank Lucy Campbell for helpful discussion of the material in Section 2.
74 This is the most controversial claim: that someone can be sexually attracted to another person without experiencing sexual desire. We have in mind cases where sexual desire does not arise due to other overriding reasons, such as the social or practical unacceptability of the desire.
75 Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis Centre uses an analogy of tickling to illustrate this: 'The occurrence of sexual arousal during rape is completely normal and victims should never feel ashamed of their body's automatic responses because those can't be controlled. Using tickling as an analogy can be helpful; when a person who is ticklish is tickled, they will laugh and smile, even though they absolutely hate being tickled.' Laurence Cobbaert, The Caged Bird Sings. Sexual Assault and Sexual Arousal. *Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis*. (2016) https://www.glasgowclyderapecrisis.org.uk/news/blog/sexual-assault-and-sexual-arousal/ [Accessed 2 Dec. 2019]
76 Igor Primoratz, *Ethics and Sex*. (Abingdon: Routledge 1999), at p. 46
77 Alan Goldman, 'Plain sex.' *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, (1977): 267-287, at p. 268
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